

# The Esthetic Element in the Origin of Mythology

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## The Esthetic Element in the Origin of Mythology.

It is easy in mythology, as many have demonstrated and a few have recognized, "to make everything mean everything".(1) It becomes necessary, therefore, before attempting to glance at the esthetic element in the origin of mythology, to state what, for the purposes of this paper, will be meant by origin, esthetic and mythology.

By "origin" is meant not merely the beginning in time, the first appearance as an event. This, if we could reach it by any process of scholarship, would throw valuable light on the science of mythology; but it would not alone be sufficient for an explanation and it is plainly impossible of attainment.

Whatever special method of study we may choose to pursue, we cannot well disregard the evolutionary formula; and this, while it ultimately presupposes a beginning, contradicts itself by seeking to go back of that beginning to know its cause. Probably, at least since Darwin, no one has ever been so hopeful as to expect the backward road to lead him to the first example of anything, without an antecedent of its kind. We cannot hope to find the first myth, but some have sought to find a particular instinct in mankind or a peculiar combination of circumstances in prehistoric life,

1. Muller, Chips from a German Workshop.

which gave rise to this human product, mythology.

Thus some have traced myths to ancestor worship, belief in spirits derived from dreams, decay of language, and as many other sources. From the point of view of one not thoroughly enough acquainted with any one of these to be prejudiced in its favor, they all seem important and not to be neglected. So far from any one's being sufficient in itself, however, to account for the phenomena that they are invoked to explain, it would seem as though all these taken together might require further assistance to produce the result. An explorer may trace a river farther and farther back to the point where four or five mountain streams unite and flow downward as one. But this will not explain the volume of water that pours into the sea at the river's mouth. The large and small tributaries that join it on the way to the sea may add more water than they find. The acorn may be the cause or source of the oak, but unaided by sunshine and rain could never produce it.

So we may, according to which leader we follow, trace mythology back to curiosity or awe or anthropomorphism as the original impulse that set the ball rolling. But I believe it can be shown that any one of these remote causes or all together will need to be supplemented by some tendency which, like the incline plane and gravity, kept it rolling to the end. I shall, then, feel justified in considering under origin any influence or tendency which has contributed to mythology as we know it, whether it may

be supposed to have laid the foundation or placed the coping stone.

But what is mythology itself? In the attempt to recognize all claims in the compass of one short sentence, I am tempted to say: The beginning of everything that differentiates man from brute. As all roads lead to Rome, so all forms of life seem to be traceable to the single cell and all elements of civilization to the myth. The historian can go back only so far on the ground of fact before he finds himself in the quick-sands of legend and soon in the deep water of actual myth. Philosophy and science, which keep getting confused with each other all along the way, lose themselves in the same source. No one can study the history of religion without studying mythology and the reverse is also true. If man is to invent stories about his gods he must first have the idea of a god, and here begins religion. We might say with equal truth that before man can worship he must have an idea of an object of worship and here begins mythology. Poetry and all the fine arts and all social and political customs are more or less closely connected with mythology and one writer has made it the source and original form of language itself.

It is evident, however, that any such sweeping generalization as this will end in utter confusion. We are in danger now, not of making everything mean everything, but of making one thing mean everything. Before we can discuss the origin of mythology we must try to decide just what

characteristics mark it off from these other germs of civilization.

Probably no one would have real difficulty in separating mythology from history in the abstract, however hard it may be in particular cases. With philosophy and science, however, it is different. Myths are primitive attempts at explanation of natural phenomena and explanation, as such, is the province of science and philosophy. Probably, if it were possible for our backward road to lead us into the actual presence of man's first guess at a cause and his first rudimentary myth, they would be found to be the same thing. But though differentiation of science and mythology may come later in time than the element that unites them, it is present in the earliest times that history knows anything about. When the ancient Greeks explained the origin of the world by their story of Chaos and his wife, the goddess Night, they created a myth; but when Thales said that all things came from water he laid the foundation at once of science and philosophy. The difference, then, lies in the anthropomorphic or personal element. Any explanation of nature which falls back upon a personal cause, at least for particular phenomena, may in this sense be said to be mythological; while any explanation which presupposes a uniform law independent of particular wills, is scientific.

But if mythology is not science, neither is it

religion. It has been pointed out that the two are mutually dependent, and would seem, therefore, to have sprung from a common source. But they can never be really identical. "Religion", says Andrew Lang, "is always in a far higher level than mythology".(1) "The religion of savages, in its childlike and hopeful dependence ---- is absolutely human. On the other side, as in the myths of Greece or India, stand the absurd and profane anecdotes of the gods".(2) "In a certain sense, probably any race of men can be called monotheistic".(3) "In moments of truly religious thought, even the lowest tribes turn their minds toward a guardian, a higher power".(4) "The Being appealed to by the savage in moments of need or despair may go by the name which denotes a hawk, or a spider, or a grasshopper, but we may be pretty sure that little thought of such creatures is in the mind of the worshippers in his hour of need".(5) Max Muller says: "To call the wind the breath of

1. Lang: Myth, Ritual and Religion. Vol.2 p.10.
2. " " " " " " " p.11.
3. " " " " " " 2. p42.
4. " " " " " " 2, p43
5. " " " " " " 2, p.43.



a living being is a myth ----- but to pray to it and offer sacrifice is religion".(1)

If not with religion then it seems that with theology the myth must be identified, and indeed the relation is close, but here too there is a distinction. A myth is narrative and descriptive and precedes theology proper though it may survive and coexist with it. Theology is more abstract than mythology. The relation of mythology to poetry and the other arts need not be dwelt upon here. Its relation to language will come up in connection with the philological theory.

There is another source of confusion, however. Mr. John Fiske in his "Myths and Myth-makers", discusses under stories of sleeping nature in the winter months Balder, Sigurd, the Sleeping Beauty, Charlemagne and Barbarossa, St. John sleeping at Ephesus, and Rip Van Winkle's nap in the Catskills. Balder is a character of myths, Charlemagne in his supernatural aspects of legend, and the Sleeping Beauty of folk-lore or fairy tales. Again, lightening is said to be the original of the hammer of Thor, the spear of Odin, the sesame of spring wort that opens the door to subterranean palaces and treasure hords, and the forked branch of hazel which points downward in spite of the holder when he walks over a place where water is hidden in the ground. Anything pertaining to Thor or Odin belongs to my-

thology, the earth rending talisman to folk-lore, but the water divining hazel to modern and still current superstition. The Century Dictionary defines mythology as a series of myths or fables, and a myth itself as a traditional story in which the operation of natural forces and occurrences of human history are represented as the actions of individual living beings. It distinguishes further: Fables and parables are invented consciously to teach a truth. A myth is believed absolutely. The Cyclopedic Dictionary says: "A philosophical myth is the evolving of an imaginary fact out of an idea - a legend is the evolving of an idea from a fact. Thus the Romans had an idea of the origin of their state and evolved the myth of Aeneas. Where real facts become embellished by fiction they are a legend".

It would seem as though Mr. Fiske had included more phenomena than the title of his book would strictly allow when he explained myths, legends, traditions, fairy tales, folk-lore and superstition all under the head of myth. I believe, however, that this is justified, if as he tries to show, they have a common source and can be explained by the same theories. If modern superstition is, in a large measure, a remnant of mythology proper, it has a right to contribute its testimony and be explained along with its antecedent form. Professor Santayana says that science and mythology can be distinguished in that science supplements facts by other facts from the same sphere,

while mythology invokes causes of a different order from facts which they explain and which cannot be either verified or disproved.(1) This statement is comprehensive enough to include all the forms mentioned by Fiske.

There is probably very little essential difference between the modern folk-lore of Germany and other European countries, and ancient mythology. The latter, it is true dealt with gods and heroes, while the former must be content with lonely pilgrims, beautiful maidens and other private and terrestrial individuals. This is, however, not as much a difference in character as in outward circumstances. In a country where the Christian religion is taught and believed, however imperfectly understood, there is no place for gods and goddesses; and the popular fancy, which must people its world with more than the senses supply, creates heroes and heroines instead.

By "esthetic" I evidently do not mean beautiful according to our modern standards, if such there be. To prove that there is an esthetic element in mythology as we know it would be an easy and delightful task, but one not worth the doing because no one could be found to dispute it. It would be no less easy to show that, from our point of view the ugly also abounds. As long ago as the time of Plato certain features of Greek mythology had begun to shock the moral and esthetic sense of thinking men, and Plato finds in this sufficient grounds for banishing the

1. Santayana: Life of Reason. Vol.V. p.16.

poets entirely from the state. Indeed it is just here that mythologists have found their hardest task and the source of most of their disagreements. As long as they confined their studies to the classic and Teutonic systems of myths the absurdities were perplexing enough, but since the field has broadened to include the beliefs of savage and barbarous tribes, they are vastly multiplied and proportionately harder to explain.

The theory of evolution must come to our rescue. Whatever view we take of beauty we can hardly deny some appreciation of it to the most primitive peoples. If we grant that beauty is entirely relative to the consciousness that perceives it we place it at the mercy of any individual who chooses to say that he prefers a chromo to the Sistene Madonna or a limric to Paradise Lost, and his taste cannot be gainsaid. If, however, we grant that there is, as Socrates taught, an absolute beauty, it is by no means clear how finite man could see or attain it and we practically deny beauty to the world and its appreciation to man.

To Herbert Spencer no act seemed perfectly right in a world that contains imperfections, but he was compelled to grant relative rightness or moral worth to such as tended toward the final attainment of complete perfection. Some such provisional sense of beauty at least must be employed to bring the esthetic judgment of savages, perhaps of all people, into the catagory.

The sense of beauty is both active and passive, both appreciative and creative. Passive, it approves, active it creates an object of approval and becomes the art instinct. It is impossible to deny that the savage appreciates when we must grant that he creates. An arrow head cannot be any sharper or fly any faster for having a carved picture of a fish or a tree on the side. Whenever any useful object presents any feature <sup>that</sup>, could not possibly have contributed to its usefulness, it is safe to conclude that its purpose is ornament and its object the beautiful.

Esthetic appreciation is attributed to savage races by most writers that have discussed them. "The truth of the esthetic code or standard in any country, community or class varies with the standard of education".(1) "Man rose out of the savage or brute state by ornaments of his person. Man has been defined as a rational or religious animal. He might as well be defined as an esthetic animal".(2) "The savage when he tatoos or paints himself or puts a fish-bone in his nose is obeying a confused sense of the beautiful. He is seeking for something beyond what exists, he is trying to perfect his type, guided by a dim notion of art."(3)

1. Holmes-Forbes, Science of Beauty. p.39.
2. Ribot, Psychology of the Emotions. p. 343.
3. Gantier, Quoted by Ribot in a note Psychology of the Emotions.p.343.



Sir John Lubbock(1) speaks of the habits of savages, of painting their skin bright colors, and wearing necklaces, earrings, bracelets made out of bones, teeth, shell or hair.

But it is a long step from the bone ornaments of a savage to the work of a Raphael and it has been the hard task of students of esthetics to find a definition which would include all these. Here are some of the attempts:

"Those pleasures are esthetic which are permanently pleasurable in memory. The esthetic field varies from race to race, and in the same person from year to year."(2)

"Beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of an object".(3) "The objective element of beauty is suggestiveness. A beautiful quality is one which ----suggests, not communicates, a pleasant sensation, and when there is no such suggestion there is no beauty".(4) "When anything is merely contemplated and the will at the time says 'Let it be' that we call beautiful. When this judgment becomes active it is the art instinct"(5) Professor Hirm says(6)

1. Lubbock, Origin of Civilization. Chap. II, p26.

2. Marshal, Pain, Pleasure and Esthetic. p. 105.

3. Santayana, Sense of Beauty. p. 49.

4. Holmes - Forbes, Science of Beauty. Chap. III p42.

5 Professor Templin..

6. Hirm, The Origin of Art. Chap. I p7.

that most authorities agree on the negative criterion of Art. It must exist for its own sake and anything which can be proved to have another and a utilitarian object is not true art. This, however, as he points out, is hard to apply to savage art on the principle of evolution for if only that survives which is of some service in the struggle for existence, how then can that have become developed which, by its very nature, cannot have had a practical purpose? It would then require a miracle to explain its existence. All art may have been partly practical but came to be appreciated for its own sake and apart from practical motives. Just as religion is influenced by men's practical needs but is not to be confused with them, so the purely esthetic element in art is exclusive of any practical end, though the practical may have been developed with it.

The term esthetic will, then, be applied to anything which man finds approvable, passively or actively, for its own sake and as contributing to no other object.

## II.

Carlyle has said: "Paganism sprang out of many roots ----but Hero-Worship is the deepest root of all."(1) Every mythologist who has ever advanced a theory for the origin of myths would probably be willing to adopt this as

### 1. Hero and Hero-Worship.

a statement of his own position if he could change one word in it to suit himself. No matter how emphatically he may have insisted upon some particular instinct or occasion as the origin of myths, he has generally recognized the possibility of other factors, and will grant the "many roots" if only he may be allowed to name "the deepest root of all." I am going to proceed upon the supposition that, so far as concerns the first part of his statement, Carlyle was right and that mythology cannot be accounted for by reference to any one human impulse or historical situation. It becomes worth our while then to consider some of the "roots" that various scholars have suggested.

The study has been approached in so many ways and the hypotheses proposed are so widely varied that any one who would try to weave them together finds many scattered threads to be gathered up and arranged. It might be taken up from the point of view of the instincts in man out of which it grew, the occasion in external circumstances from which it took its beginning, or the methods by which it has been studied.

The last of these is, perhaps, the least important of all and yet has called forth the most controversy and, taken with the second, has caused certain discussions of the subject to take on the appearance of personal attack and defense, rather than scientific argument.

Professor Max Muller puts all mythologists into three

classes: the Etymological school, which bases all knowledge of myths on knowledge of the language in which they are expressed; the analogical school, which contents itself with tracing resemblances between myths, however widely apart in space or time or nationality; and last the Eth<sup>n</sup>o-psychological school, which bases its views on studies in ethnology and comparison of races, paying considerable attention to savage myths as the source from which those more highly developed have come. The method of study pursued naturally shows its influence in the theories evolved, and it is only through these that the question of method can have any bearing on the present subject.

Attempts have been made to state mythology in terms of one human instinct, as in Santayana's terse phrase: "Fear created the Gods."<sup>(1)</sup> This desire to simplify, which pervades all science and is itself an esthetic demand, has led many writers to exaggerate in the direction of simplicity and hence to disregard important factors. There are few parts of man's life that are not touched by his religion or poetry and that do not in turn, reflect their influence. If we could count all these influences and then remember that mythology, being more inclusive, may be the resultant of still more, the task of finding these seems hopeless enough. Without trying to enumerate them

1. Santayana, Life of Reason. Vol. III.

all, however, it may be possible to find the most important.

There have been pointed out at least four strong instincts in man prompting him to the mental activity which ends in myths. They are awe or the religious instinct, ~~the scientific instinct~~ anthropomorphic modes of thought, and the art instinct. These have, for the most part, been incidentally mentioned or taken for granted by mythologists. Most of the controversy has arisen about methods of study, as mentioned above, or about the occasion in the outside world which calls forth the myth-making activity. Among these may be mentioned historical fact, natural phenomena, departed ancestors, and linguistic problems. I shall take up these eight suggestions in the order here followed, except that the art instinct will come last, and try, if possible to show an esthetic motive behind each.

It is a noticeable fact that nearly all systems of myths concern themselves with the current conception of deity. This cannot, of course, be made a distinguishing feature of mythology, unless some wider term be employed which will include legends and folk-lore and various other examples of godless myths. The fact that the gods are so important in these stories, however, is significant. Man is trying to frame in some intelligible or perhaps sensible way his idea of the unseen force that he feels impelled to worship. It can hardly be doubted, I think, that the



religious instinct is one of the fundamental factors in mythology. It would be hardly convincing to take the religious instinct for granted without defining it, and yet there is hardly space to do any thing else here.

Menzies says: "Religion is the worship of higher powers", (1) from a sense of need." Max Muller says it was "due to esthetic impressions from without answering to an esthetic and intellectual inner need." (2) "In a sense, then, religion arose from illusions, but the poetic faculty which prompts us to find outside us what we feel within us and to assert its reality, led man right and not wrong." (3)

Santayana finds man's first recognition of external powers arising from the opposition which his own will meets and which is therefore attributed to another will, to be feared and placated. "The feeling with which primitive man walks the earth must be for the most part apprehension, dependence, on external powers, not because they threaten but because they forsake". (4)

If we accept as one distinguishing feature of the esthetic its immediacy and disinterestedness, it is certainly applicable to religion in its aspects of awe and reverence. It is only when man finds something outside him-

1. Menzies, History of religion. p. 70 and 11.
2. Muller, quoted by Menzies. p. 42.
3. Menzies, History of Religion. p. 63.
4. Santayana. Life of Reason. Vol. III p. 28.

self which seems more powerful or perfect than himself, something which to his esthetic judgment, whether rude or cultivated, seems worthy of adoration, that he can be said to worship. These vague reachings out after the hidden reality, "These longings, yearnings, strivings for the good they comprehend not", what are all these but the stirrings of esthetic emotion seeking the highest of all objects?

It is true that man's sense of dependence also influences his worship, and that his rites and ceremonies often have a very practical object and even resemble barter. We do not have to go to savage nations to find the vow: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on ---- then shall the Lord be my God ---- and of all that thou shalt give me, I will surely give the tenth unto thee" Neither, perhaps, is any religion worthy of the name, entirely destitute of the spirit which could say: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." Yet when we have said this what have we admitted except that the economic element in religion is not the esthetic? that the loaves and fishes are not the heavenly vision? It is easy to see which is the more important by imagining each to exist alone. The part of religion which brings offerings in order to receive again may degenerate into magic and become unrecognizable as religion at all; but that which appreciates and worships a higher reality for its own sake must always

constitute the essence of religion.

In so far, then, as mythology rests on the religious instinct and supplies its object, it may be said, partly at least, to spring from and satisfy an esthetic need.

But mythology tries to answer not only what? but but why? and how? The conception of the uniformity of causation may be comparatively modern, but the idea of causation itself is as old as man. If in any respect we we can read the history of primitive man in the history of the child, it is here. They both want to know why, not in an abstract way but in human terms. Who did it? how? when? what for? And no sooner has either been given or invented for himself an answer, than he must needs ask again. Every answer suggests a new question. If the earth rests on the back of a turtle, what does the turtle rest on? and so the imagination goes on from one question to another and must leave its last question either unanswered or unasked.

This desire to know is essentially the same in the myth-maker and in the scientist and, in so far as it is disinterested and is an end in itself, may be said to be esthetic. "The desire for knowledge becomes as imperious as the thirst for power or gold. It is only when this desire is supreme and unalloyed, that science yields its most abundant fruits."(1) Professor Blackie gives the elements

1. Porter, Science and Sentiment.

of beauty. "The simplest element of beauty is order." This exists by action of the living principle of unity. Among other elements he names actuality, totality, simplicity. (1) The primary object of all science is unity and order---the comprehension of all the confusing variety of phenomena under some few formulas, and eventually these under one. What a vast step science took when it discovered that the same force held the moon in place and made the apple fall; or that light, heat, and electricity are all forms of energy. Whenever the mind, however, primitive, is able to take two similar phenomena and speak of them as one, it has taken a step in science. Each science arranges in order the facts with which it deals and philosophy finds a unity in all these lesser unities.

But the unity and harmony and order for which science strives are all elements of beauty. Any theory which involves intelligibility is itself beautiful."(2) "There are cases in which a man of science devotes his whole energy to abstractions but it is always an open question whether the attractiveness of such research is not more esthetic than scientific".(3) "The artist's

1. Prof. Blackie. On Beauty. p.2.

2. Professor Templin.

3. Hirm, The Origin of Art. Ch. II, p. 20.

development depends on the same qualities largely as the scientist's."(1) In connection with the alleged incompatibility of science and art, Marshall observes that "constant concentration of thought in one special direction may lead to curtailment of capacity for pleasure getting in others, but this implies a shifting of esthetic field and not its loss."(2) "Not only is it an esthetic demand which prompts the question but as sentiment furnishes the moving force of science, so it shapes its ends."(2) "We have a third kind of poetry in what has been the natural religion of detached philosophers of all ages. In them the imagination touches the precepts of morals and ideals of reason, attributing to them a larger scope and a more perfect fulfilment than experience can show. Philosophers ever tend to clothe the harmonies of their personal thought with universal validity."(3) "The best philosophers seldom perceive the poetic merits of their systems."(4) "Science and common sense are themselves in their way poets of no mean order, since they take the material of experience and make

1. Marshall, Pain, Pleasure and Esthetics. p. 13.

2. Porter, Science and Sentiment. p. 23.

3. Santayana, Poetry and Religion. II, p. 25.

4. Santayana, Poetry and Religion. IV, p. 107.



out of it a clear, symmetrical and beautiful world."(1)

"A scientific and mathematical vision has a higher beauty than the irrational poetry of sensation and impulse."(2)

"Even knowledge of truth is an esthetic delight for when truth has no further practical utility it becomes a landscape. The delight of it is imaginative and its value esthetic."(3) These quotations only show that there are others beside Plato who have recognized the unity of the beautiful and the good and who could express themselves essentially in the words of Keats: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

The tendency of man to think in anthropomorphic terms shows itself in his religious and scientific solutions of life's problems, but is not the same as either. It is conceivable that the first thinkers should have worshipped forces as such without endowing them with personality, or arrived immediately at some such abstract and impersonal theories as modern science has given us, without passing through the anthropomorphic stage. In fact, to the modern it is hard to enter into a state of mind that could conceive of the sun tied by a giant, the clouds as cows, and the storm as a fiery dragon. Many theories have been

1. Santayana, Poetry and Religion. VI. p 270.

2. " " " " VI. p 270.

3. " Sense of Beauty.

offered to account for this tendency. Some have been content to say that man naturally reads outer phenomena in terms of his own consciousness and attributes his own life to the lifeless. It is true that we find in children a tendency toward such thinking, as when they suppose the moon to talk and plants to suffer cold; but it is very hard to tell in any particular case how much of this is due to the child's originality and how much to suggestion from adults. The infant mind, though perhaps analogous to that of the savage, is about as much of a mystery, and we are left to conjecture the actual state of both. Several writers such as Caird(1) and Morgan,(2) have pointed out that it is probably not a process of projection of the inner personality outward, as a complete confusion of ideas in which the animate and inanimate are not distinguished and are therefore spoken of in the same terms. "Man looks outward first. He has a confused view of himself and everything else. To the savage all conceptions are fluid and pass into each other without warning."(3) Morgan thinks that alter and ego are at first confused and later differentiated by mutual reactions.

1. Caird, Evolution of Religion. p. 202.
2. Loyd Morgan, Animal Behavior. chap. VI.
3. Caird, Evolution of Religion. p. 202.

Muller gives a very interesting explanation of anthropomorphism, based, like most of his theories, on language. It is a little bit hard to decide exactly what his opinion is on account of some contradictions. For instance: "It is absurd to suppose that human beings could ever have failed to distinguish animate and inanimate, when animals hardly ever go wrong here, or that man should ascribe life and a soul to moon, sun, trees. This is an insult to the human mind."(1) Almost directly following: "Our belief in God has its roots in an ancient, universal stratum of thought which postulated an agent in sky, sun, fire."(1) "If we could believe again that there was in the sun a being like our own, that in the dawn there was a soul open to human sympathy, if we could bring ourselves to look for a moment upon these powers as personal and adorable ---."(2) It is not clear what could be the difference between life and a soul on the one hand, and an agent, a being like our own, a soul open to sympathy, on the other.

Again, "In ancient language every noun had an ending indicating gender. As a result, as long as man

1. Muller, Anthropological Religion. III.
2. " Chips from a German Workshop. Comparative Mythology.

spoke and thought in language it was impossible to speak of morning, evening, spring, without giving them an individual active, sexual and personal character."(1) One is prompted to ask how each word came to have this ending expressive of gender and whether it could have preceded personification. But the answer is ready to our hand. "It has generally been supposed," he says elsewhere, "that grammatical gender was the cause of personification. It is not the cause but the result."(2)

His theory of anthropomorphism,(3) however, goes deeper. Every root originally expressed action. Primitive man, he thinks, was wont to accompany his actions with spoken syllables and these came to express the action. Substantives were formed by the addition of some syllable denoting agency and thus all things were spoken of in terms of action. The lightening became a hisser, the storm a striker, and the river a runner. Language and thought are one. Man cannot form concepts independent of the words that express them; and as long as he is obliged to speak of the river as a runner or the sun as a shiner, he must think

1. Muller, Chips from a German Workshop. Comparative Mythology.

2. Muller, Origin and Growth of Religion. p. 182.

3. Muller, Anthropological Religion. Lec. III.

of it as a conscious agent. This does not exactly contradict the theory of confusion of ideas, but goes farther to find its cause.

But whatever the cause of anthropomorphism, it is essentially a poetic mode of thought. Literatures begin with poetry and develop prose later, and language and thought pass through the poetic stage and arrive at the less poetic attractions. The figure personification has come to be used almost exclusively in poetry and adds an element of beauty. Indeed it is doubtful whether poetry, as we know it, could ever have existed without being preceded by this unconscious metaphor of the primitive mind. "It is conceivable," says Santayana, "that some race should never have been tempted to use psychic and passionate categories in reading nature ---. Such a race could hardly have had lyric or dramatic genius."(1) A scientific theory or an abstract formula may have and, I believe, does have a really esthetic value for the one whose mind is able to appreciate it; but for the vast majority of mankind the esthetic must lie in the concrete, the actual, the personal; and a mythology, if one can so speak, which described lifeless forces rather than conscious beings, would lack most of the elements which, in existing mythologies, are considered beautiful.

1. Santayana, *Life of Reason*. Vol. III.

### III.

As soon as the popular faith in the gods of mythology waned, or even before, when the few philosophers began to look for less personal and more invariable causes for things, the myths themselves began to be the subject of speculation. It is interesting to note that Plato advanced practically the same linguistic theory which Muller has been doing battle for in our own time.(1)

Some of the suggestions that have been made are so fanciful as to have for us now somewhat the same kind of interest as the myths themselves. Such is the idea(2) that all mythology is a degenerate and much changed form of the Bible narrative, an idea evidently worked out in the interests of the Garden of Eden.

Others have supposed that all the characters of mythology once actually lived, but the details of their lives, as popularly related, have become somewhat distorted from frequent repetition. This idea goes back to Euheneros, a Greek;(3) and, as I understand it, cannot be far different from what Carlyle meant when he said: "This mythology

1. Plato.

2. Muller, Contributions to Science of Mythology Vol.I

3. " " " " " " Vol.Ip 74



came from the thought of Norse men, of the first Norse man that thought and expressed what the many dimly felt and longed to express. This first thinker was Odin."(1)

"Surely there must have been an Odin in flesh and blood."(2)

Here he gives us some details of his life, stating that he came from Asia with his Asas (Asiatics) perhaps B C 70, and that he introduced runes. It would hardly be fair to Carlyle not to quote what precedes: "The primary characteristics of this old Northland mythology I find to be impersonation of the visible workings of nature."(3) It is hard to see how these two thoughts can be harmonized without a little more explanation than he gives. It must be remembered that Carlyle was not a mythologist and that his hero theory in mythology is only a part of his philosophy of history, which derived all civilization, not from the many small but from the few great. It might be easy to disregard him entirely if it were not for the fact that his theory had been advanced before and that it really represents an important truth.

1. Carlyle, Heroes and Hero-Worship.

2. " " " " "

3. " " " " "

"If there were no books", he says, "any great man would grow mythic in thirty or forty years after his death, when his contemporaries were all dead".(1) This may be an exaggeration but that there is truth in it, innumerable cases attest. One of the hardest tasks of the modern scientific historian, and the one, perhaps which distinguishes him from chroniclers of past ages, is the sifting of fact from fiction. Charlemagne, in his legendary aspects, has been pronounced a solar hero. Frederick Barbarossa awaits reawakening in the hills of Germany. Arthur has so lost himself in myth that even the historical nucleus has been disputed. But it is not only the lapse of time and the ignorance of the middle ages that produce fictitious history. Even so young a country as our own offers numerous examples. Pocahontas was the most picturesque figure in American history until the ruthless hand of criticism(2) robbed her of her chief glory --- the saving of Captain John Smith's life. The story of how Marcus Whitman(3) saved Oregon to America, which is less known but quite as stirring, has been disproved within the

1. Carlyle, Heroes and Hero-Worship.
2. Henry Adams, Hist. Essays. Capt. John Smith.
3. E. G. Bourne, Essays in Historical Criticism.

last decade. Every school boy in America knows that George Washington once chopped down a cherry tree with his little hatchet, while every mature reader knows or may know that he did not.

The sword(1) presented to Washington by Frederick of Germany is a case in point. This sword bore the inscription "From the oldest general in the world to the greatest," and was given as a mark of personal admiration. Many of Washington's descendants heard and believed the story and it is stated that John Brown endangered himself at Harper's Ferry and caused his own capture by waiting to send for this sword, as he expected to achieve success with a weapon that had been wielded by two conquerors. This story may itself be an illustration of the myths of history, but its truth or falsity would about equally attest the strength of the sword tradition. The story of Frederick's present seems never to have been doubted till since the John Brown incident. When an examination of the swords of Washington failed to show the alleged inscription, the tradition took a slightly different form and the words that had before been inscribed were now a verbal message. There is no sword of Washingtons, however, which seems worthy to have been a gift from an emperor, and no

W. D. Conway, Cent. Vol.19, p 943 Washington and  
Frederick the Great.

expression in Frederick's writings or those of his biographers indicates that he admired Washington or was interested in him.

How then did such a story originate? Its earliest known form (appearing in the New Jersey Journal, Aug. 9, 1780) makes the gift a portrait instead of a sword but the accompanying words are the same. Washington is known to have received a sword from a private individual in Germany, and from a woman in America a pipe on which was the name, Charles Frederick. The meaning of this is unknown. It is possible that in some way the story may rest on this slender ground in fact. But suppose it could be proved that it does, what more do we know than we did before? The question still remains; Why should a fact, whether an incident small or great, or a human life, gather around itself associations which it did not originally have? Why indeed unless they are pleasing to those who repeat them and those who hear?

Washington's sword is a good example of the creative, or, if you please, decorative art of the popular mind. It is a beautiful idea --this passing of the sword of conquest and victory from the old world to the new. It is peculiarly fitting that an old warrior about to disappear from the battle fields of the Old World should pass on his sword to the young leader of the New.

It is easy to see why this act should appeal especially to Americans. It was a stroke of true art which substituted the sword for the portrait. But the inscription, which is the same in both, is a little gem of its kind "From the oldest general in the world to the greatest." One feels irresistibly that if Frederick did not say it he ought to, and it is so much the worse for Frederick.

This, I take it, is what Carlyle meant by Hero-Worship. Indeed his term is not broad enough to include all this idealizing of the real. Man has always tended to paint the Devil blacker in proportion as he added whiteness to the robes of the saints. This could hardly be called Hero-Worship but it is the reverse side of the same process. Truly in popular tradition, "To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." This instinct of the human mind to embellish everything that it touches shows itself in small things as well as in great. Every one that repeats a story feels the impulse to make it a little more dramatic, or vivid, or striking. We may be architects of our own characters, but every man that has ever attracted public attention has had considerable help on his reputation.

History and daily life, then, attest that a real occurrence or a real character, adorned by the popular imagination, can create a Charlemagne or a Richard as we know

them. Could it or did it produce Jupiter and Thor and Little Red Riding Hood? Authorities say no. Historical fact could not be the only nor even the most important basis of mythology, but that it has played its part could hardly be disproved by those who doubt it. That it alone produced the Greek or Norse or any other gods could never be anything but a conjecture, and one against which there is overwhelming evidence; but that it might have helped even there, seems highly probable from what we know of modern legends. Muller tells us that the Vedic siege of Troy took place in the clouds, but Schlieman found Troy and explored its streets and houses. They may both be right, A story brought by the Greeks from the common home of the Aryan race may have become confused in the popular mind with an actual war and the confusion may account for the geography of the Illiad.

Whatever may once have been the belief in the historical origin of mythology, it is not now held to any great extent. However much writers may argue about totemism, fetishism, and the decay of language, on one point they are practically agreed, and that is the vast importance of natural phenomena as a starting point of myths. Even those who propose some other object as the original cause, have to acknowledge that in some way these stories have attached themselves to the most striking forces of nature. One great service that the Etymological school has



done, is to make it clear by identity of names that the sky, the dawn, sun, moon and other natural objects were originally spoken of by the same names that now represent deities. Man's feeling of awe and reverence was most often excited by the vast phenomena around him, whether beneficent or terrible; and his curiosity most often busied itself in solving the problems of the wonders in which he lived. It is possible that this truth may have been exaggerated, especially in the case of some of the larger phenomena such as the sun and the storm cloud. Some have been accused of reducing every body to solar heroes, ~~making~~ making all due allowance, however, for the over-credulity of scholars when their favorite theories are to be supported, the fact remains that the forces of nature have formed the nucleus and foundation for the majority of myths.

It is impossible to think of nature without thinking of beauty. The two great divisions of the beautiful are nature and art and it has generally been conceded that it is one great purpose of art to imitate nature--to transcend and interpret and complete her, it may be,---but to be true to her. To say that primitive man loved nature, worshipped her, questioned her, dramatized her life, is to say that he had already discovered in his rude way the great source of esthetic delight.

It may be that man at first worshipped Nature blindly and personified her forces from sheer confusion of thought, but there came a time when he thought of his gods as real personalities, perhaps inherent in some way in the objects, but still living beings with wills like his own. Among many races, too, appear the ideas of transmigration and life after death. How came man to distinguish in himself a material and an immaterial part or to have the idea of the spiritual and unseen as distinguished from the physical and seen? Such questions as these have led speculation off upon another track and have given rise to Spencer's theory of ancestor worship.

Man's shadow was seen to be an immaterial thing but to follow him and take his form; when he crossed the stream or peered over the bank a second person whose motions paralleled his looked at him from beneath; when he shouted down a canon a hollow sounding voice mocked him and and ever the person behind it eluded his search; when he slept he visited other scenes and talked with the absent and the dead, while those who watched assured him that his body had remained in the same place; now and then a companion lay perfectly still and senseless for hours while this invisible something that made him move and talk was gone; and each one sooner or later came to the hour when this spirit did not return and the watchers watched in

vain. By some such data as these, we are told, man first learned to distinguish the physical from the mysterious "somewhat" beyond the physical and arrived at the concept of soul or spirit. A dream was a real experience of this etherial self and if it communicated with the souls of the dead in sleep they must still exist. A parent or grandparent, honored when living, would be revered when dead and placated and appeased by superstitious rites and offerings. Thus ancestor worship.

The process by which Spencer(1) supposes this fundamental form of religion to have given rise to other forms is very ingeniously worked out. Savages gave suggestive names. Many civilized people do too. A man might be named Wolf or Hawk from some personal peculiarity. If he distinguished himself his descendents and perhaps others would be glad to claim descent from him. The concept of name, as distinguished from the thing, would be later to arise and men would confuse the ancestor with the animal for which he was called. Persons honored with the name of sun or moon would lend them their personality in the same way. The idea of composite monsters arose from the descent of a person from a father called Lion (let us say) and a mother called Wolf. Both names would be inherited and the monster pictured to suit the name.

1. Herbert Spencer, Essays. Origin of Animal Worship.

The habit of describing nature in human terms, according to Spencer, is not common, but the custom is rather the reverse. Men took their names from natural objects and endowed them with personality in return.

That Apollo, or Balder, or Varunna could have been anybody's ancestor is not an idea that meets with much support among mythologists. The theory cannot be wholly disregarded, however, as long as nations exist in which the spirits of ancestors are worshipped. The Chinese, to mention the best example, seem to have no clear conception of any other deities. It seems quite possible, that, among people in whom the tribal or family feelings were strong, and the immortality of the soul believed in, ancestors should have been the first object of worship and the starting point of myths. The ancestor, before he could gather a cycle of traditions must be idealized and the process then becomes very similar to that in which any historical character gathers mythical attributes. That this involves an esthetic element, I have already attempted to show.

Another occasion of mythology which has been elaborated by Muller is the etymological explanation. On first thought this would seem to be the most unpromising of theories, and yet it has been worked out with more careful and wider labor than almost any other. It traces mythology to a disease of language and reduces it to a phase in lin-

guistic development. This cannot be taken as a cause co-ordinate with natural phenomena, for Muller himself by his extensive work in mythological names, has made it forever impossible to doubt, <sup>in many cases</sup> at least, that the gods were originally phenomena. And yet etymologies, as he treats them, are something more than mere steps in the process, they are secondary starting points. His "disease of language" theory is closely connected with his explanation of anthropomorphism. Men must think in active terms and posit a factor for every fact and an actor for every act. The thought and the name go together, and, having once given any phenomenon a name denoting action, the necessities of language compel man to speak of it as acting. Thus Eas(1) or dawn originally meant "to shine." Men would speak of Eas as going, coming, waking, sleeping, not metaphorically but as matter of fact in the same way that we would say, "The sun rises." Having accustomed himself to speak in this active and personal way, man forgot the original meaning of his words and evolved a myth to suit the personality that his language seemed to suggest. It seems that the natural phenomenon is the subject of the myth, but the cause of its production is man's desire to explain his own inevitable modes of speaking.

1. Muller, Natural Religion. Lecture XVI.

It is somewhat too severe a strain on our credulity to be asked to believe that the enormous body of mythology produced by all the nations of the earth was caused by forgetting the signification of words, or (as Lang points out) that all language should have passed through the same malady with similar results. Granting however, that the theory may properly apply to some cases, it may yet be reduced to man's curiosity turning upon his own psychological process instead of on objective nature. If we agree that the same native curiosity has produced the psychologist, the chemist, and the philologist, there is no reason why, at its early stage it should not have busied itself with the meaning of words and customs. I say at an early but not at the earliest stage. Muller himself would hold that man must have concerned himself with the sun and the dawn first, formed ideas and invented words, before he could have forgotten the meaning of these words and worked out new explanations. His mythology would be growing in the meantime and yet would doubtless be influenced by the confusion of language. To whatever extent the disease of language may have been operative, it is largely dependent on man's native curiosity and feeling for the harmony of things which demands that a habit of speaking or acting, as well as a part of nature, shall be explained and connected up with the rest of life.



#### IV.

So far I have tried to show that whether mythology is studied from the point of view of objective fact or subjective faculty, its value for its believer is largely an esthetic one. Whether it be derived from historical fact, family relationship, natural phenomena or linguistic problems, it is largely the esthetic in all these that sets them up as worthy of man's idealization. Further, whether it is prompted by religious feeling, scientific curiosity, or a natural tendency to think in personal terms, there is an esthetic side to these impulses which helps to give the impetus to myth development.

There are probably many theories of scholars and many examples in the myths themselves which would come outside any of these divisions. Andrew Lang insists upon the prominence of animals in folk-lore and traces <sup>it</sup> to totemism. The Zoöomorphic tendency of the mind can be classed roughly with the anthropomorphic tendency. Animal stories are probably a survival of the past when man was not so far removed from the brute as now, and in his confusion of ideas failed clearly to draw the line.

Müller, so far as I know, has not tried to apply his theory to such deities as the Greek Psyche, Cupid, Hope and the three Fates. These are evidently personifications

of more or less abstract ideas and would be later in development than those based upon physical objects. There are many others which it will be impossible to discuss here, such as culture heroes and departmental gods.

Doubtless the principle of economy would best be subserved by the elimination of some of these causes and occasions, but the facts seem to warrant the addition of one more. Granted that man must worship and explain and personify, still why myths as they exist? How shall we account for the explanation that does not explain, and the acts which render the god not more but less adorable. If Ulysses is the sun, wedded to the twilight weaver of clouds, who must leave his bride and wander without her for the greater part of his career, detained by Circe, the moon, and Calypso, a nymph of darkness, returning to Penelope, the twilight, just before he passes into night; if, I say, Ulysses journey is simply an account of the sun's course for a day, why should the narrative fill the books of the Odessey? If Jupiter is merely the embodiment of the Greek idea of God, why should he have figured in so many compromising and undignified episodes? There must have been some other principle at work here, and this let us call the art -- instinct.

This has not, so far as I know, been dwelt upon at length by anyone, but it is recognized in such

quotations as the following: "All deities do not represent phenomena or forces of nature. Some myths are mere creations of the imagination."(1) "That ancient sentiment of the human heart which makes men listen to a human voice in the thunder and yearn for immortal friends and helpers, lives its life little disturbed by the other impulse which inspires men, when they come to tell stories and romances about the same transcendent beings."(2) "A legend or a fable lying in the mind and continually repeated, gains insensibly at each recurrence some new eloquence."(3)

"There are two factors in mythology, moral consciousness and poetic conception of things."(4) If the art-instinct is merely the esthetic sense in the active voice, and if, as I have tried to show, this esthetic sense is more or less operative in all the alleged causes of mythology, then the art-instinct as one cause of mythology might, perhaps, be taken for granted. I believe, however, that it works not only in these other causes but in a sense independently -- if any one of a series of causes can be said to work independently-- and this entitles it to separate treatment.

1. Anderson, Norse Mythology. p. 91.
2. Lang, Myth, Ritual and Religion. Chap. XVII.
3. Santayana, Life of Reason. Vol. I.
4. " " " " Vol. III.

Indeed, I find this principle to be of wider applicability than any of the others. Mythologists acknowledge that some myths do not, so far as they have been interpreted, try to explain nature. A large number of the stories here included in mythology have nothing to do with religion. A myth based upon historical fact or developed from worship of ancestors, could hardly be attributed to the anthropomorphic tendency, since to speak of persons in personal terms requires no such explanation.

Art is man made beauty. Literature is one division of art and in literature the creative imagination busies itself most of all with character and plot. Now it is precisely these two elements that mythology furnishes. The man of genius adds here, takes away there, and casts the whole into the mold of poetry and we have a work of art, which would be acknowledged to have been produced by the art instinct and for esthetic ends. But how does the contribution of the poet differ from that of the most obscure individual, through whose mind the story passed, and from whom it received even the slightest addition? Is this difference one of kind or of degree? In other words, did Homer take a body of myths, wholly unesthetic and produced with no esthetic motive by the "people" and make from these, by his artistic genius, the greatest of epics? I think not. The question is less hard to answer in regard

to what may be called modern mythology. When we turn to such stories as those collected by the Brothers Grimm from the firesides of the people, where the hand of no conscious artist has ever intervened, we find them developing in the original way. In savage and barbarous nations and in many chimney corners in countries of civilization, we find myths in the making, stories still told, not as curiosities but because they are immensely real to the listeners.

Classic Mythology we know only through the medium of epics and dramas which bear testimony to the hand of a master and are obviously esthetic in quality and purpose. However, nobody supposes that whoever put the Illiad and Odyssey in their present form, created their contents out of nothing. The stories were taking shape for years before and owe something to every wandering minstrel or temple priest or village story teller who changed them slightly (unconsciously it may be) to suit his own sense of the beautiful or what he conceived to be that of his hearers.

Yes, even the esthetic sense in the passive has done its share, not perhaps in actually changing any myth but in determining which should survive. The progress of mythology too has been by the survival of the fittest and the test of the fittest has been the presence of the beautiful as it was conceived at the time. Indeed what other test could there be which would account for the survivals?

It could not be efficiency in explaining phenomena, for many of the hypotheses of mythology could not have satisfied the human mind for long. We have science growing up beside mythology with its explanations of surer and wider application, and yet mythology persists. It could not have been merely the satisfaction of religious needs for surely the religious nature of man does not require so many divinities as the mythology of any nation presents; and further, as has been pointed out, the moment of deep religious feeling must have had for its vaguely represented object a being vastly different from many of the gods. Prayers were offered, no doubt, to Zeus or Thor by name, but the true worshipper could not have borne in his mind at the moment, the human and irrational things that his fancy pictured. It seems that the multiplication<sup>of</sup> episodes and personalities would have hindered rather than promoted religion.

Anthropomorphism, if we suppose it to be a universal necessity in the early stages of development, could doubtless produce the germs of most myths but will hardly account satisfactorily for their survival along with impersonal thinking.

It is true that, as myths cease to answer the questions of science and supply the objects of religion, so also they often cease to satisfy the esthetic sense. The Greeks themselves, in the time of Plato had begun to



wonder at and explain away some of the enormities of their own myths. What is this, however, but saying that the esthetic judgment had climbed higher and scorned the lower levels it had left. Science and religion outgrew mythology, only the beautiful element in anthropomorphism survives in poetic personification. The art instinct alone keeps mythology alive.

When modern machinery was invented the hand loom disappeared from service and survives now only in museums where man reads in such relics his own industrial history. Mythology, whatever it once did, serves us no longer as a scientific explanation or a religious object. We now have other tools of thought than personification.

If these are all that it ever furnished man why has it not been put in a glass case along with the other relics that have outlived their usefulness, and become a matter of mere historical curiosity? It may be answered that classical mythology is a dead thing, preserved in a cabinet of exquisite workmanship, and yet it can hardly be maintained that our only interest in it is that of curiosity as to what the Greeks and Romans once believed. No one can once lose himself in the stories of Hector and Andromache (for example) and then doubt that this and all like it still serve the great purpose that they have always served and for which primarily they were created --that of

leading the mind by Plato's steps from fair forms to fair practices, from fair practices to fair notions in into the presence of the Beautiful itself.

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